

the armoured head, clattered down scales with the rockets still fizzing and came to rest at the flexing junction between wing and body.

The majestic rhythm of the ray's feeding didn't miss a beat.

The Free Yankees raised a muffled cheer, and the harpoonist thumped Redd between the shoulder blades with such enthusiasm that he couldn't breathe for a full minute afterwards.

Meanwhile the harpoonist took up her own weapon, this one fully primed. She raised it in her right hand to her shoulder, held her left hand across her chest, a glowing wick between finger and thumb. She spun the harpoon's shaft and the wick dragged across the fuses of the rockets.

Then she leaned right back, flung her weapon forward.

For a moment it seemed to hang in the air, sparks flying from the furiously burning fuses. Then the rockets lit and it arched away in a flare of blue flame. It struck just behind the ray's tiny red eye, skittered sideways down its body. Then the charge blew. Dust rolled out from the explosion's brief red flower, leaving a ragged wound at the creased junction between the ray's body and its wing.

There was a convulsive shudder under the boat. Everyone except Lee and the harpoonist fell on to the coils of cables in the well. The ray's filter combs collapsed into its mouth and sheets of dust blew sideways, but the combs didn't shake themselves out again.

The muscular woman grabbed another harpoon, but as she braced herself something heaved under the boat and it rose until its prow pointed straight at zenith. The harpoonist flew backwards and hit the mast, and slid down it until she was sitting. The boat fell back and as the harpoonist struggled to her feet something plummeted from the top of the mast. It was the painted ironwood eagle. It hit the harpoonist's head with a heavy thud and fell into her lap as she slid back down again, this time quite unconscious.

Veils of dust were rising all around the edge of the ray's vast wingspan. The boat rocked as wave after wave passed over the wing on which it rested. People were hauling on the sail. One turned to Lee, jerked his thumb across his throat, pointed down, made a whirling motion.

Lee understood. The ray was about to sound. When it did, the boat would go with it, sucked under in a maelstrom of displaced dust.

Virus reflexes made it easy to brace himself, exactly as the harpoonist had done. Redd saw what Lee was going to do, left off tending to the harpoonist and grabbed a slow match. He

kicked away someone who made a grab at the harpoon and lit the fuses of its rocket cluster. Dust clouds shaken up by the ray's flexing wings made a dense smog, like fire-lit smoke. Its body was no longer visible by ordinary light, but Lee could see it clearly by infra-red, saw a hot spot just behind its bottle-end eye, a patch of blood-rich skin where the lapping armour plates had drawn apart. There was no time for thought. He aimed and threw.

The rockets exploded in mid-flight, blindingly bright through swirling dust. Lee balanced like winged victory. The rocket's red glare vanished – then a dull explosion blew out thick goutts of blood and pulped flesh which splattered everyone on the little boat and drummed like hail on the sail.

There was a moment of silence, and then the Free Yankees yelled and began throwing clusters of recurved hooks attached to the long thin lines. When enough of them had snagged, the Free Yankees started hauling them in, dragging the boat across the now still wing and jumping on to the ray's body like so many pirates boarding their prize, armed with silvery bladders which they promptly began attaching at the dust line.

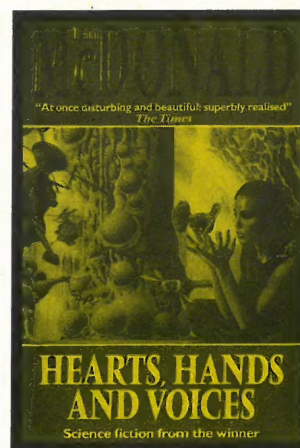
Lee followed Redd. The armoured scales were like a tiled roof; beneath them, through his boots, Lee felt a complicated tremor, the failing of the ray's nervous system.

The harpoon's charge had made a big fleshy crater. Blood, thick and black as crude oil, was drooling from it, and the dust seethed as blood sank into it: plankton feeding on the life fluid of the creature which had fed on myriads of their cousins. As the dust slowly cleared Lee saw that the ray's wings had sunk below the surface, and that the taut bladders were mostly buried; attached by hooks, they were all that were keeping the ray afloat.

Masked men and women were capering and stomping up and down the ray's long flat body. The harpoonist had recovered, and was alternately rubbing her sore head and semaphoring her arms up and down as if she was trying to take off.

Redd grabbed her, whirled her in a brief waltz. Someone knelt, hands cupping flame. When he stepped back a rocket shot up at an angle over the dust sea, burst in a golden falling flower, bright against the soft pink of the sky. After a minute another flower bloomed, small with distance. Lee backtracked its trajectory, saw a speck at the horizon line. It was the shoal, black sails crowding every tree as it bore down on the dust ray.

IAN McDONALD



# HEARTS, HANDS AND VOICES

• Shortlisted for The Arthur C. Clarke Award •

The advocate Kalimuni and Mathembe's grandfather had been firmest friends. Their friendship was of the kind that is nourished by the friends' total inability to agree upon a single point. Over their endless games of *fili* under the awning of the Teahouse of the Celestial Blossom, they had argued Proclaimerism versus Confessorism, Imperialism versus Nationalism, organic technology versus inorganic technology with such vehemence that proprietor Murangeringi had been on the verge of calling the constabulary at Tetsenok to restore peace to the glass squares of Chepsenyit. They had once argued long into the star-filled night, long after the chairs had settled back into their sleeping configuration and the awning had retracted, over the colour of a speed-dog that sat across the square from them scratching at parasites. They argued in Old Speech, of course, for it was the language of dissent and laughter. Now even the word 'speed-dog' had been reduced to meaningless sounds.

As a Confessor, Mathembe's grandfather could not resort to the law and organs of government with the same facility as Proclaimer Kalimuni. Nevertheless, he too played his part in the protest against the New Namers. He embarked upon a word boycott. He refused to call by name anything that had been renamed by the Emperor's linguist. A point, a nod, a shrug, a general indication of 'that there' or 'this here' or 'yonder thing' was all he would permit himself. People were reduced to monosyllabic grunts: family, friends of many years' standing; grunt. Whole districts of township, prefecture, nation and world became a *thitherwards* toss of the head. He spat them all out as if they were shit and ashes on his tongue.

In his boycott, Mathembe felt solidarity with him. His silence was not as complete as hers, but it was a bond between them. They became eloquent in silence. Even at the end when it was obvious to all that his dying was upon him and the time to enter the Dreaming and the fellowship of his ancestors was nigh, he had obdurately refused to allow words tainted by the hand of the Emperor Across the River to remain on his lips. He had summoned the advocate Kalimuni (by grunt

and general indication) and demanded that he draw up a will that made sure everyone received their dues without actually having to be mentioned by name. He became legendary: the township came to know him as the man who was starving himself to death on silence. Though, as he confided to Mathembe, 'No one ever died for want of words in his mouth, or you'd be dead long ago, granddaughter of mine. No, you have it right. Never to speak at all: that is the highest, the noblest protest.'

Unto the very end, when the people from the House of Heads came with the ritual masks and valises of organic technology to lop off the head, connect it to its support systems and transport it, closed-eyed and cyanotic, to the Grove of the Ancestors, he had refused to call Mathembe by name. Even when he had felt the dying break over him like a cold, drowning wave and he had cried out for someone to help him, hold him, please, hold him – though he knew that the journey into the Dreaming is one we must all make alone – he had called out, son of mine, daughter-in-law of mine, granddaughter of mine!

After the head had been grafted into the Feleli family tree, many in the township came to congratulate it for having protested unto death. The head did not acknowledge their presence. The people went away, hushed and reverent. The head was obviously in deep communion with the ancestors in the Dreaming, the great network of roots and synapses that underpinned the physical landscape into which the individual consciousness of the dead passed.

The head was doing nothing of the sort. The head was maintaining in death the protest it had made in life. It would not accept the praise and platitudes of those who honoured it for doing something they had not the integrity to do themselves. It closed its ears to their words. It would not even recognise Dr Kalimuni when he came to visit his old friend. It was a bold thing for the Advocate Kalimuni to do – if the shrine moderator learned that he had been to visit a pagan Ancestor Grove, he would have been Named and quite possibly shunned by his co-religionists. Proclaimers, when they died, were gathered straight into the person of God. Mathembe admired their confidence. The Dreaming might not be heaven but it was a fairly safe bet on some form of immortality, and required no undue exercise of faith.

The only visitor that earned a flicker of